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## Post Election 2011 - How will the Selinger government move Manitoba forward?

**O**n October 4th Manitobans gave Selinger's NDP a mandate to govern for the next four years. The NDP ran on a Doer-esque steady-as-she-goes platform with the slogan *Let's keep building. Don't turn back.* Eyes will now be watching to see how the details unfold, giving us a better sense of the kind of legacy Selinger intends to leave. Here are some suggestions.

Health will and should be a priority. Healthcare spending consumes more than 40 percent of the provincial budget. If Manitoba is to become a national leader in health as the NDP proposes, it will need to take more seriously the social determinants of health (SDOH) by making it the central framework from which policy is developed.

The SDOH approach recognizes the many factors that determine health outcomes. A central theme is that keeping Manitobans healthy begins by increasing equality. This approach has long been endorsed by the World Health Organization, and in the internationally acclaimed best seller *The Spirit Level*: why more equal societies almost always do better, authors Wilkinson and Pickett provide solid evidence that demonstrates why the preventive SDOH approach promotes improved health. The CCPA-Manitoba book titled the Social Determinants of Health in Manitoba shows how this approach can be used to improve health outcomes in Manitoba.

Adequately attending to the SDOH will require a new way of working cooperatively across

government departments, between levels of government and with non-government organizations to ensure that all Manitobans have sufficient income, access to safe and affordable housing, health and social services, childcare, education and so on.

### **The persistent problem of poverty**

Research shows unequivocally that on average, people who are poor have worse health and other outcomes. The NDP government has taken some steps over the past twelve years to help those living in poverty, but they must do much more. There continues to be far too many Manitobans living in poverty and this is taking a social and economic toll.

Manitoba has passed anti-poverty legislation that has the potential to make a difference but the government continues to resist setting general targets and timelines for achieving them. They should do so just as they have in other areas such as the elimination of business taxes and increasing the number of doctors and nurses. Research shows that committing to timelines and targets delivers results. Failing to set targets to reduce poverty suggests that it is not a priority.

To begin, the Province must increase social assistance payments for those in greatest need and provide access to a variety of tools to reduce social exclusion and ensure access to jobs that pay well. By and large the NDP government has been content to allow those most marginalized to sustain themselves



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through the generosity of strangers and charitable giving. This is not an appropriate model for an NDP government that espouses social justice values.

Crime is an issue that is closely related to poverty. The NDP has taken leadership in supporting preventive programs that are making a difference. These efforts must be scaled up.

The Selinger government must provide stronger leadership in collaboration with the federal government and Aboriginal leaders to improve the services required by Aboriginal peoples both on and off reserves. The Aboriginal population in Manitoba is growing, it is on average younger, and Aboriginal people continue to be over represented among those with the lowest incomes and poorest health outcomes.

### **Comprehensive approaches to infrastructure and economic development**

As a crown corporation, Manitoba Hydro is an example of an important public policy tool whose potential has not been fully realized. The NDP government has shown how Manitoba Hydro can be used to meet multiple objectives by integrating targeted training and employment into infrastructure and economic development. Comprehensive approaches can stimulate our economy and address infrastructure needs while also serving to fight poverty and crime when training and employment is targeted toward high-risk populations. This strategy is proving to be effective in northern hydro development projects as well as in projects like Winnipeg's Building Urban Industries toward Local Development (BUILD) and the Brandon Energy Efficiency Program (BEEP). The province should scale up these kinds of projects and others that make effective use of Manitoba Hydro.

Financial resources are required to address the ever-increasing infrastructure needs in our communities. Cities and towns are demanding that provincial and federal governments provide more funding to address their "infrastructure deficits." Manitoba already has a relatively

generous program of support for municipal activities. However, it is also true that most Manitoba municipalities have serious infrastructure needs. The Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM) recommends that the province provide more funding.

This idea would benefit municipalities because provincial funding would allow them to claim the credit for fixing our sewers and roads without having to raise municipal taxes. But the Province would have to find the revenue from somewhere – likely unpopular new taxes – but wouldn't share in the glory. It's a political problem that the Selinger government needs to resolve.

### **Labour rights/employment standards**

The NDP government has improved employment standards and labour relations forward, but not enough. These areas too relate back to health. People need to have decent work to stay healthy. They also need to know that they won't lose income or be fired when they are sick. For example, during the flu pandemic workers in hotels, restaurants, etc. were reluctant to take time off when ill because they would lose pay. Amending employment standards legislation to include a sick-leave scheme and a 'just cause' clause would protect workers who are ill.

In the Social Determinants of Health in Manitoba, Black and Silver show that it is in our collective interest to have a democratic and robust trade union movement in Manitoba. The Selinger government should amend the Labour Relations Act to make it easier for workers to form unions by allowing automatic certification when unions sign up 50% + 1 of workers in a bargaining unit.

There is no shortage of work needed to move Manitoba forward. Manitobans will be watching closely to see what kind of legacy Greg Selinger will create.

*Shauna MacKinnon is the director of CCPA Manitoba*



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